By the Author of ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’

A Story Game for 3-5

disguised as a play in three acts

Written by

~~Oscar Wilde &~~ Edward Turner

Produced for

Game Chef 2014

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The Persons in the Play:

The Playwright

The Producer

The Director

The Lead Actor

The Props Master

The Stage Manager

Various actors, stagehands, workers, servants, &c.

The Scenes of the Play and Summaries:

Prologue: The study of the Playwright's manor home.

> The Playwright addresses the audience, introducing the basic conceits of the show, as well as the specific conceits of this document. He explains what you must read, what you should read, and what is basically trash that you might as well skip.

ACT I: In the auditorium of the Bracknell Theatre.

> The Producer reveals that the company is to put on a play they have not prepared for, and to which they do not have a script. Upon discovering that it is to be the latest by Oscar Wilde, the company decides that they can improvise the action.

ACT II: Backstage of the theatre.

> The Director and Props Master discuss all the preparation which will be required for this night’s performance,

including the generation of *sets*, *characters*, and *props*, and the creation of the *plot*.

ACT III: On stage.

The Director and Stage Manager discuss how the show will be performed, including *setting up Acts and Scenes, advancing the plot,* and *delivering bon mots*. They shall also reveal *how to tell if the play has been successful.*

EPILOGUE: On the apron of the stage.

The Playwright appears, in order to explain the genesis of the game briefly. This is followed by a *simple recap of the rules*¸ which will be clearer and more immediately useful than an extended, flavorful digression.

TIME: The Present

PROLOGUE

The playwright's study is large and lush and earthy, all dark wood and red faux-leather furniture. The centerpiece is a desk, upon which is a sheaf of papers. Many further papers, some crumpled into balls, litter the floor.

[The **Playwright** is seated at the desk. He looks up.]

Playwright: Oh, hello there. [He stands and moves downstage.] Let me apologize for this "one-man-show" opening; it's gauche, but I felt it was important to discuss how this was going to work. This isn't really a play, you see. This is a game. A game in the genre I mostly hear called "Story Games"; table-top role-playing games built around simulating particular sorts of narrative, generally built for single sessions of a few hours, and often without a Game Master or similar figurehead.

But it's written in the form of a play. Yes, that makes this an in-character document, and yes, those can be dreadfully obnoxious, but if I didn't get an opportunity to flex my obnoxiousness from time to time I would positively burst.

[The **Playwright** pauses to take a mug from his desk and sip at it. He pauses a moment, savoring both his beverage and the impatience of the audience.]

Playwright: [Smiles.] But because I am not entirely heartless, I have endeavored to keep things as simple as possible. Act one, you will see, is nothing more than the summary of the plot. It's got some good lines in it, but no especially clever twists, so if you wish to duck out for a coffee and come back at intermission, that should be fine.

[The **Playwright** frowns, with evident concern.] Look at me, already I'm pretending that I'm actually an actor addressing an audience in front of me. Believe me, I'm aware that I'm being read, not watched, I'm merely forcing myself to hold on to this "it's a play" conceit. [Laughs.] Although I would love

to see an actor's interpretation of this line if this game ever does get performed.

Where was I? Ah yes. Act two is entirely concerned with setting up the game and character generation. It is entirely chronological: the order in which things are done in the show is the order they should be done at your table. I've also put important moments in ***bold italics*** which might help them stand out.

Act three is about the rules of play. When in doubt, the Stage Manager is the one who provides the actual mechanics, so keep that in mind, and only unwrap candies when other characters are speaking.

Finally there will be an epilogue, at which point I will come back. [Sarcastically.] Hooray!

That's where I'll talk a bit about the game itself, its genesis and inspiration and similar rambling. There's a lot of ego there. I mean, there's ego here too, but not nearly as much of it.

The epilogue also contains the most useful portion of the text: the rules of the game, laid as bare as possible. That is to say, acts one through three expressed in bullet points over a few pages. It's much less amusing, and lacks some of the suggestions, examples, and explanations, but it covers everything necessary without a lot of silliness tacked on. I recommend reading through the acts, but if you want to play the game, all you'll need ready is that portion of the epilogue.

But what do I know? I just wrote the thing.

END OF PROLOGUE

ACT I

The auditorium is full of lounging actors, none of whom appear to be invested in their craft. The chairs are not cheap nor especially lush, suggesting a well-off second-run theater. The lead **Actor** and **Director** are present, engaging themselves in trivialities.

[The **Producer** enters, and the assembly looks up.]

Producer: Ladies and gentlemen and above all, actors, there has been a miscommunication. It seems that in a moment of ill-advised skimming of the contract with our theater, I confused "March" and "May," two months which, I hope you will agree, look offensively similar in print.

[The actors nod, and mutter in vague agreement.]

Producer: Agreed! But alas, this does put us in an unfortunate situation, because it now seems that our opening day is not so much in two months as it is in two hours.

Actor: [Leaping upright.] Two hours? This is our first rehearsal; we haven't even read the play yet.

Producer: This will be a challenge and no mistake. So. Who among us has the book?

[Nobody responds.]

Producer: [With increasing desperation.] The playbook? The manuscript? The bound sheaf of paper in which the plot and dialogue are set out? Anyone? [A moment’s silence.] Shall we look around for it, perhaps? In the costume closet? I am certain it arrived, I remember distinctly that it was a windy day and my tie was askew.

Actor: [Looking under a desk.] I found a penny!

Producer: A glimmer of hope in this, our darkest afternoon. If we assemble that penny with several of its friends we might send you down to the bookshop to procure a fresh copy of... ah. Does anyone happen to recall the title of the play we're to perform this evening? Anyone? Or... the author, that would be helpful too?

Director: If I recall correctly, it's a Wilde.

Producer: [Relieved.] Then we are saved! Everyone, stop looking. You, give me that penny, you don't need it anymore. [Takes the penny from the Actor.] Ladies, gentlemen, actors, it's a Wilde. We can make it up. After all, what do we need? A plot, a setting, a group of characters... no, that's not right. That's how you construct, I don't know, a Shakespeare or some such malarkey.

No, we’ll just need one part idle rich, one part tragic secrets, garnish with declarations of love, and end every act with a bon mot. Lightly sprinkle in a plot wherever there’s room. I do not fancy this shall be a challenge.

[The **Director** rises, and indicates to the assembly that they should as well.]

Director: I suppose it shall fall upon me to organize this? Very well, let us take to the properties room; with luck we'll find the materials to improvise a Wilde there.

[The **Director** leaves, with the assembly in tow. The lead **Actor** and **Producer** linger behind.]

Actor: I do hope you realize how great an inconvenience you have caused for us. I myself had plans for the evening, and I assure you, work was not among them!

Producer: Oh, I am as mad as anybody about this. But if the blame should fall on anyone, it should fall on those blaggards who bought tickets for opening night. [Laughs derisively.] The audacity, paying good money to watch us make fools of ourselves. I hope they feel ashamed.

END OF ACT I

ACT II

The properties room is a cluttered mess of props, costumes, and pieces of sets. The company squeezes in wherever they find room.

[The **Director** enters, with the **Props Master** in tow.]

Director: Listen carefully everybody; we don't have a lot of time to spare, so we're going to have to do a lot of making do with this play. Fortunately, we have at our disposal a brilliant props master, isn't that so?

Props Master: [Stoic.] If you say it's the case, it's the case.

Director: Lovely. Now, before we begin, what tools do we have at our disposal to make this happen? Hm?

Actor: We have got index cards, many of them, and writing utensils.

Director: Excellent.

Actor: We have a penny. Indeed, we have dozens of the things; some of us were playing poker.

Director: Excellent, although any similarly-sized token would be sufficient, so long as they are reasonably numerous.

Actor: And of course we have three to five players.

Director: [Confused.] Three to five? Can you be more specific than that?

Actor: [Attempts to count fellow actors, fails, and shrugs.] I cannot.

Director: Very well. This is what we have. Indeed, ***this is all we need:*** index cards and utensils, many small tokens, and three to five players. Shall we begin?

[The **Director** finds a seat among the detritus.]

Props Master: We have several tasks before the show can begin: we must determine what sets we have to use, we must create and costume appropriate characters, as well as minor cast members, and we must collect appropriate props.

Let us begin by ***determining our sets***.

We open tonight, so we shall not have time to construct fresh sets. We'll have to make do by adapting what we have on hand. Every player should take an index card and a pencil, and write down a set on it, something which you know we have on hand, or which you are sure that we can construct with the materials cluttering up the backstage.

Don’t spend too long writing it out, but do give it a sentence or two. Something like…

“The sitting room of a wealthy country estate. The curtains are drawn, and the room is dark, with an overly forboding atmosphere. There’s a piano on which one might play songs nobody wants to hear,” or “The command deck of the starship *Intrepid*. There are numerous consoles, all blinking with lights and activity, completely incomprehensible to the audience and, likely, the poor saps manning them.”

Director: While the audience will be expecting something set in the parlors of stately manors and the sitting rooms of London flats, we aren’t strictly beholden to those locations! After all, the man did Salome, yes? So if the man can do biblical settings, he might as well do strict histories or fantasies or, penny-dreadful horror settings. Or spaceships, whyever not? So long as there’s room in the setting for upper-class folks to banter with one another, it can be anywhere at all.

Props Master: Every player must create a set; if they wish, they may create a second. In all cases, the players should not discuss the sets as they create them! Once every player has determined one or two sets, then you can share them.

Director: That would be a good time to discuss what genre you feel the show should take place in. It shall be a farce, and a comedy of manners… that much is a prerequisite to a Wilde comedy, but it might be contemporary or historical, urban or rural, things of that nature. Use the sets on display to determine what genre might work; ignore sets freely! You need not include them all!

Actor: So, determining the sets is our opportunity to influence the setting, and the sort of story we'll be creating?

Props Master: [Dismissively.] Yes, something like that. Once you've made that determination, get rid of the cards whose sets are unusable for that story, and keep the remainder within easy reach of all the players, so that we might all know what sets are at our disposal.

[The **Director** rises, and the **Props Master** steps aside.]

Director: Now, it's time to ***create your characters***.

Here, you may communicate with one another; you'll want some variety among the characters, after all. Fortunately, though our set design is limited, we have any number of costumes; virtually any sort of outfit you can imagine is at your disposal.

Take another index card, and write down a character, someone who might be interesting to play. It should be someone of high society, whatever that means in the particular setting you've chosen. Give them a name and a quick description: "Algernon Montcrieff, a rake of good fortune but low standing," for instance.

Next, give your character a tragic secret. Every character has a secret and every secret is tragic and, this is important, no secret is more tragic than any other. Perhaps you lost your child in the war. Perhaps you lost your hat in the cab. Perhaps you're the devil himself. By and large it's no matter what your secret is, just that you have it, and that you won't let anybody find it out, at least not before act three.

Now give your character a vice. Or a virtue. Whichever you prefer, they're basically the same; this is a thing you do often. Gluttony, chastity, honesty, correcting everyone's

grammar; something that makes your character interesting or, at least, less dull than most members of high society.

Set up a relationship with the player to your left; it might be "antagonistic best friend" or "true love, kept apart by fate." It might even be something else, although, really, those are the big ones. Write it down. The player to your right will set up a relationship with you, write that down as well. Work together on these, you should both be happy with them, and for goodness' sakes, don't establish a love triangle unless you absolutely must! It makes for an untidy happy ending.

And there you have it: ***your character has a name, a description, a tragic secret, a virtue or vice, and a relationship to the character to your left.*** Just need to get you into makeup and you'll be ready.

Actor: [Sheepish.] I'm sorry but, will this be enough characters? I mean, there are only three to five of us. That seems a slight cast.

[The **Director** frowns at the cast.]

Director: So it might be. We'll have to cross-cast some of the minor roles; given that they're basically walking costumes, I think the Props master should be in charge of that.

Props Master: Quite. Very well, let us ***create the minor characters.***

Take another index card; on it, you shall write a character who is somehow relevant to your own, and who might be of interest in the play.

Director: A true love, a romantic foil, a domineering matriarch… am I missing anything?

Props Master: A butler.

Director: [Slaps his head.] How unaccountably foolish of me, yes, a butler.

Props Master: Give the character a name and a quick description, including their relationship to you, such as "Merriman, Jack's trusted butler." Put the cards within easy reach of everyone. These are the minor characters at our disposal. These are the only minor characters at our disposal; I can only ready so many costumes in the time remaining. This means that the ancillary cast might end up taking on additional roles to fill gaps in the narrative; keep some room on those cards to take additional notes, in the event that, say, Robert's foil ends up being Meg's mother as well as Tom's true love.

Director: You will be portraying these minor characters as well, but you won't have exclusive control over them. Anybody can throw on the butler's costume as needed. We can make very convincing costumes.

Stage Manager: Finally, let us ***procure some props***.

On two more index cards, write down a prop, one per card. Anything which you feel you might want to encounter during the show; there's enough time before curtain that I should be able to procure anything we don't have.

When in doubt, make one something which has to do with your secret, and the other something which has to do with your vice

or virtue, but that’s not a requirement by any means. Pile these cards up somewhere within reach as well.

Actor: I’m sorry, why are we putting these props on cards instead of just telling them to you? It does seem rather an unnecessary step.

Props Master: [Clears throat, gruffly.] That is simply how things are done. You don’t see me telling you how to do your job, do you?

Actor: Actually, that’s precisely what you’re doing right now.

Director: [Interrupting.] And a very good job you’re doing of it, too!

[The **Props Master** glares unhappily at the lead **Actor**, then stalks off.]

Director: We are very nearly ready to begin. Our last task is to ***start making your lies and happy endings.***

Obtain two final index cards; at the top of the first write your character’s name and the words "Happy Ending." On this card, you will write what will be the happy ending for your character; if you have a true love, then it will involve, by necessity, getting married. Otherwise, it can be anything which will leave your character happy for the remainder of their life, and warm the hearts of the audience. You do not need to know what it is right away; let the narrative inform your decision if you must. But when you do know, write it down so that you can start subtly steering things in that

direction, and let the other players know, so that they may steer as well.

At the top of your final index card, write your character's name and the word "Lie." Leave plenty of space, and at the bottom place three empty circles.

Over the course of the play, you will be filling this in with a lie that your character tells the world. It might be something to cover up their tragic secret, or it might be something to get them closer to their true love. Or anything else. There are two matters of importance:

One: This lie is something which they feel they must tell, in order to maintain their position or achieve their happy ending.

Two: This lie is untenable, and will collapse by the end of the play. Furthermore, it must collapse in order for them to actually obtain their happy ending.

If you have an idea for your character's lie or happy ending, write it down now. At the moment, lies are more important: perhaps you are living a double life, or perhaps you're covering up your tragic secret. These are solid motives.

If you're feeling up to it, you may take a slightly more abstract view of the lie as well. Perhaps your lie is closer to a "scheme," in that it's a thing you are attempting to do without being caught.

Actor: Should we work together on this? In order to make sure the plot is sensible?

Director: Plot? Have you been listening? We're not doing a Shaw here, we're doing a Wilde! This is farce; there's no call for a plot, just a series of escalating improbabilities. But

let’s save that discussion until we’re on the stage; for now, a quick review.

By this point, there should be the following, written on index cards:

Several ***Sets***, where action may take place, piled nearby.

One ***Minor Character*** for each player, in easy reach.

Two ***Props*** for each player, also within easy reach.

One ***Character*** for each player, complete with a *Tragic Secret*, a *Vice (or Virtue)*, and a *Relationship* with the players on either side of you.

One ***Lie*** that each character is telling, or at least a card on which that lie can be recorded, and a similar ***Happy Ending*** card for their inevitable happy ending.

Are we prepared?

[The company mumbles their assent.]

Actor: Didn’t you say we needed a number of small tokens? Those haven’t come up at all yet!

Director: Those… yes, those will become important over the course of the play itself. Although to be honest, I wish you wouldn’t remember the things I say so well. It puts a tremendous pressure on me to remain [Shudders.] consistent.

END OF ACT II

ACT III

The stage is currently bare, though all the sets the company discovered in the previous act are poking in from the wings, and the props are in a pile nearby. The **Director** is addressing the company, including the lead **Actor.**

Director: Now that we have created our essentials, it is time for us to put on a play.

Actor: Should we take notes? Prepare a script?

Director: [Pulling out and glancing at a watch.] There's no time. We are going to have to improvise. But do not fear! I shall provide guidance for the mood and tone of a Wilde play.

[The **Stage Manager** arrives, carrying a tray of tokens.]

Stage Manager: Mm. Hello. I will be around to help the play run smoothly, and I'll talk about how that happens while you're acting. You could say that I'll be discussing the mechanics for this little game, and that if there's any question of how things operate while the play is ongoing, you should remember the things I said.

Director: What a bizarrely specific way to word that.

Stage Manager:[Indicating the off-stage sets] As a group, decide where the first act is going to take place; you can use

any of the sets you've created, but you are limited to the sets on hand! We haven't the time to adjust on the fly, so we'll have to make do.

Director: If you're not certain, just pick one at random. It will be fine.

Stage Manager: Every player must also select a prop to leave onstage. These props need not be used or referenced, but they are available for any character to stumble across or use as they see fit.Remember, these sets are lush and well-appointed; this isn't Jacobian drama where one should be happy to have some black flats and a chair. No, there's furniture and suchlike; but none of it's real. You can sit on it, but you can't otherwise interact with it.

Director: To put it another way, if the set has a piano, the audience will see it but you can't play it. If there's a prop piano, you can play it.

Stage Manager: The set we choose will be our set for the entire Act, and every character is expected to make an appearance. If the plot suggests that your character is on the other side of the estate, or on the other side of the world, you are going to have to justify your appearance.

Every Act is made up of scenes, one for every player, during which that player's character will be the focal point. Now, these divisions are rough; the stage is not likely to be fully cleared between one and the next. In the event that the set does clear between two scenes, we might be able to jigger the lights and inject a musical cue to indicate a few minutes passing, up to an hour if necessary, but by God no more than that! Scenes should flow into one another as much as possible.

Choose a player to go first; when in doubt, start with whomever has the lowest status amongst the main characters. Don't worry, every player will have a chance to set a scene in every Act!

The player setting the scene determines who, among the main characters and the ancillary cast, is likely to be present and what they are likely to be talking about. More importantly, this player determines what lie is going to be confronted in this scene. The lie must belong to a character who is present on the stage, because they'll have to defend themselves. A player can make a scene in which their own lie is being confronted, if they wish. Place the card for the lie that is being confronted in clear view of everyone, so that they know what to focus on this scene.

Director: For instance, Algy's player might start a scene by saying something like "This is a scene in which we'll confront Jack's secret about his double identity. Let's start with me and a butler, delightful banter, and Jack, come on when it feels right."

Stage Manager: While on stage, portray your characters. Say what they would say. Describe what actions they take. And remember that if your character would do something that a person couldn’t do on stage, such as, I don’t know, turn into a bat and fly away because it has been established that they are a vampire, you must first have them leave stage. An actor is just a person, after all.

Actor: I’m sorry, did you just instruct me not to attempt to turn into a bat onstage? And to describe my actions, as if I’m not actually on stage but merely at a table somewhere, eating snacks, pretending to be an actor pretending to be a character pretending to be in an Oscar Wilde play?

Stage Manager: [Shrugs, but does not respond.] In addition to your own characters, you will be responsible for portraying any minor characters which a scene might need, simply take the card belonging to the minor character and walk on stage. You may also carry props on and off stage as needed

Director: The costumes are convincing enough that the audience shouldn't notice that a character is being portrayed by three or more different players over the course of a show. Although do try to play them with as much consistency as a Wilde play would merit.

Stage Manager: If someone has not yet created their lie, they should create it before the beginning of the scene, so that they may defend it during the action. Lies are pre-existing conditions! You don’t start a lie on stage, you continue it in the face of confrontation.

Actor: How do you confront a lie?

Director: I’m glad you asked, because that means I get to answer, and I love hearing myself talk. Now, Wilde protagonists are rarely inclined to pure detective work, but it's not beyond them to simply stumble across a secret through, God forbid, sheer power of logic. But this isn't a show about detectives, unless we happen to have a police station set. Even so, they shouldn't be questioning one another, that would be far too close to work.

Stage Manager: The natural ebb and flow of your banter should end up shining doubt upon the lie, especially if there's a rival or foil involved.

Props are a great help as well; they might be stumbled across, questioned, and misunderstood with ease.

Director: If you are the owner of a confronted lie, you must attempt to maintain it! Farce is not made by people who know when they're beaten! No, when your lie is confronted, you must escalate! Elaborate! Replace your lie with another lie, a bigger, grander, and harder to maintain lie! Allow the truth no quarter, even if it means denying that the sky is blue to God Himself!

Stage Manager: To track these things, when you embellish a lie, write down the embellishment. Also, fill in one of the three circles at the bottom of the card, to track how many times a lie has been embellished.

Once a lie has escalated, wrap the scene up with all due speed. Remember, the next scene may well happen seconds after this one, so don't feel the need to nail down every tiny detail about who leaves via what door.

The next player clockwise sets up the next scene, determining who shall remain on stage, who should make their excuses and exit, and who should come on. This player also determines the next lie to be confronted.

Director: A lie can be confronted and embellished multiple times in an act, but never twice in a row. Give the lie time to percolate. Oh, and this is important: bear in mind that there is a distinction between having a lie revealed, and having another character in on the lie. You may let other characters in on the lie if you must—indeed, that makes them

all the more likely to collapse—but you cannot let them be revealed to the public or the world at large.

Stage Manager: Every player initiates one scene per act. The final scene in the act has an additional caveat: after the lie has been confronted and embellished, the scene cannot end until a bon mot has been delivered!

Actor: A bon mot?

Stage Manager: I will explain how those work in a moment, but for now keep it in mind: the act must end immediately after a bon mot.

Director: Once that happens, the curtain falls, thunderous applause, and we can take a breather as we prepare for Act II.

Stage Manager: You should announce "Curtain!" clearly to one another, to make it clear that the curtain has fallen.

Actor: Shouldn't we just… be able to see the curtain?

Stage Manager: [Irritated.] Perhaps you should, but I will insist that you shout "Curtain!" regardless.

Between acts, you may take a break, have a smoke, and discuss where the plot might be taking you, but you will have to move on to the next Act soon enough. Before you start on Act II, every player must have a lie, and before you start Act III,

every player must know what their happy ending will be. The earlier you know those, the better.

We shall also discuss how much time passes between acts. Because the curtain is down, we may declare the passage of days or weeks or years, even.

Director: But farce is built on pace, so it’s advised that we not go overboard with the passage of time. It is not unheard of for one Act and the next to be in the same set, separated only by minutes.

Stage Manager: Acts II and III work much like Act I: collectively we decide on a set, and individually we set up scenes which focus on confronting a player’s lie.

Director: Don’t forget, each embellishment on a lie should make it grander and less-plausible. By Act III, when a lie has been embellished three times, it should be ridiculously transparent.

Stage Manager: Towards the end of the play, once your lie has been embellished three times, and all three circles are filled in, you may reveal the lie; you may do this in any scene you are in, by whatever method seems comfortable, however you may not do this during the scene in which your lie was embellished; you must suffer with the big lie for some time, at least. Tortured confessions are common, but you might just as easily take up the mantle of a servant or other minor character and "accidentally" reveal your lie while you aren't even present.

Once revealed, cross out the lie on your card, but don't dispose of it right away.

Director: This is, after all, a Wilde. That means farce but with a happy ending, so if we don't do something to guarantee a wedding at the end, we can expect the audience to want their money back. And that shan't do. Fortunately, there are increasingly improbable coincidences to save us.

Stage Manager: In any scene, you may trade in your revealed lie to create a coincidence; you may do so immediately after the lie is revealed, or you may wait until an opportune moment. This coincidence is anything, anything at all, which will lead you to your happy ending.

Director: Perhaps you and your rival are long-lost brothers. Perhaps your estranged lover returns to you when she realizes how well you can sing. Perhaps you were hiding behind the couch the entire time as your father discussed where the gold is hidden. It doesn't matter, but something happens which instantly reverses your fortune.

Stage Manager: If it occurs naturally in an earlier scene, run with it, although once you have your happy ending you are expected to spend the remainder of the show offstage or as a minor character. Your character's arc has ended happily, so they shouldn't be around to interfere with everyone else's. Otherwise, there is a final scene specifically for wrapping up these loose ends.

While Acts I and II contain one scene per player, Act III has one additional scene at the end, which, by necessity, involves every character who has not yet obtained their happy ending; if that means every major character, so be it.

This scene has no lie to confront; your sole task is to ensure that every lie is revealed, every improbably coincidence

occurs, and every happy ending is reached. As with confronting lies, if you are stuck for an improbable coincidence, pull a prop from the top of the stack, and use that as the basis. If you don't need it, you don't need it. So much the better.

Once everybody has a happy ending, the play is ready to end. As in all things, you must go out on a bon mot, at which point the curtain will fall.

Actor: So, about those bon mots? Is this where the tokens come in?

Director: Yes, thank you! Actors, this is a farce, which means it must be comic, and it must move with pace. We must ensure that we do this.

You mustn't spend a lot of time thinking, is the thing; you must move! Whilst bantering, if you take too much time to think of a line, the audience will start to leave. We only have so much of the audience's goodwill, which is represented by these, the Audience Tokens.

[The **Director** indicates the pile of pennies, or similarly-sized tokens, which the **Stage Manager** brought in.]

Stage Manager: During a scene, nobody should be silent for more than, oh, ten seconds. If there is an awkward silence stretching, someone MUST break it. If nobody on stage is able to, somebody off stage should come on stage, as any character, just to ensure that something is happening.

You may take as much time as you need between Acts, and may even take a few moments between scenes, as the audience will forgive when it’s clear that actors are being shuffled about.

A minute or two. But when their attention is on you: pace, pace, pace!

Audience tokens help us regulate this. Every player begins with three, and the remainder are kept within everyone's reach; if, during the show, you need to think, or pause, or breathe, spend a token. Everybody must pause for up to one minute, while the player who spent the token is allowed to collect their thoughts. This also guarantees that whomever spent the token gets to have the next line, which is useful if you are feeling yourself spoken over.

Additionally, if you need to speak out of character, use your tokens. This includes anything which you, as an actor, might need to whisper to another actor: things like asking an actor to take back a narrative detail they introduced, requesting that someone leave and return as a particular ancillary character or with a particular prop, or simply questioning where the narrative is leading. The audience will notice the whispering, they always do.

In a similar vein, you must spend tokens to communicate with the stagehands. The stagehands are, frankly, incompetent oafs, but they can provide simple special effects (such as blackouts or thunderclap noises), or walk on as extremely minor characters without lines. Stagehands may even rustle up simple props, but they will be extremely shoddy and ill-fitting to the stage; you'll have to spend a token every time you use a stagehand-rustled prop because it shatters the audience's suspension of disbelief.

When you have spent all your tokens, you have used up all of the audience's goodwill; they will not tolerate any more hesitation or whispering on your part, and will likely riot if you attempt it.

[The lead **Actor** gasps, and the company looks alarmed.]

Director: No fear, you may win them back. Bon mots, or epigrams, or one-liners, or however you want to refer to them: bits of dialog which make the audience laugh, they will curry favor. That's what the audience is really here for.

Stage Manager: Whenever another player, while onstage, says or does something that makes the other players laugh, and be honest with this, they have delivered a bon mot, and thus the audience looks upon them more favorably. They may take a token from the central pile. And if you create so much laughter that the show stops—as in, the players are literally laughing long and hard enough to delay the progress of the game—then take two tokens as everyone catches their breath.

Director: I've noticed that some actors are shy about taking their deserved tokens. If someone makes you truly laugh, not merely chortle politely, then pass them the token they deserve.

On a similar vein, if someone is snapping up tokens for every half-witted witticism, stop them. This isn't poker, you're not encouraged to cheat here.

Actor: But if scenes only end when a bon mot is delivered, does that mean an act will stretch on indefinitely if nobody onstage can come up with a funny line on cue?

Stage Manager: Perhaps. There's an alternative; if another player says a line which is obviously intended to punnily sum up the action of an act, the sort of remark which is best followed by a rimshot, or which elicits anguished groans instead of laughter everyone is welcome to just fake it. Pretend that it was good enough. Fake laughter earns you no actual audience goodwill, but it is enough to end an Act on.

Director: And indeed, once every happy ending has been earned, or at the very least stumbled into, a halfway decent bon mot is enough to end the play on. Mr. Wilde himself was not above letting curtain fall on a groaner. [Sarcastically.] "For both of us is life a new beginning," is not a showstopping line, but it gets the job done. I guess.

Stage Manager: Once delivered, shout "Curtain!" for the last time. If you have gotten this far, congratulations! You successfully completed a Wilde!

Director: Huzzah!

Stage Manager: On the other hand, if you couldn't complete a scene, or ran through all your props and couldn't cope without them, or you paused too long and lacked the audience goodwill (and representative tokens) to allow for that, or you just couldn't deal a bon mot, or—

Director: [Cuts off the **Stage Manager**] And we are certain you will avoid all of those pitfalls, so let's just… stick with the huzzahs, yes? After that, you shall take your bow. Questions?

Actor: One: is there an order we should follow for the bows?

Director: [Thinking.] Excellent question. Yes, yes this is important. There is the final matter of the title.

We do not yet have a title for this play; we couldn't possibly have come up with one before the action happens. The audience

might walk in for any random production by the author of ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan,’ but we would like to provide them with a title they might spread to their friends and loved ones. Assuming the play is successful, of course. If it’s a failure we’re better of rejoicing in anonymity.

Stage Manager: If we are successful, then whomever has the most goodwill with the audience, that is to say, whomever has the most tokens, is the audience favorite. The audience favorite will take the final bow and, afterwards, announce to the audience what the title of the play is.

Actor: Should we write it on an index card, by any chance?

Director: If you wish. What’s one more at this point?

Stage Manager: If there’s a tie for most goodwill, then the players with fewer tokens must select, by any means they consider to be fair, which tied player is the audience favorite.

If there is a tie among all players, then whomever started the first scene will be the audience favorite.

Director: Consider that encouragement to keep your wit about you whilst onstage.

END OF ACT III

EPILOGUE

The apron of the stage. The curtain is closed, and the lights are dim, though not quite off. All is quiet.

[The **Playwright** parts the curtain and steps forward to address the empty audience.]

Playwright: [Clears throat.] Ah, hello again. It's me, the playwright.

I am not Oscar Wilde. I'm not even Irish. But I am the writer of "By the Author of 'Lady Windermer's Fan,'" so I suppose it's worth saying a few words, yeah?

This game was written for 2014's Game Chef design competition, a nine-day contest in which game designers of all stripes are asked to put together a game based on a provided theme and four ingredients.

In this case, the theme was "There is no book," which is reflected, well, in the fact that the scripts are missing. Also, that this document is a manuscript, not a book. Which means I'm counting a script as a book and as something that's not a book at the same time; which, I am told, suggests that I have a capacity for genius. So that's a thing.

The ingredients, of which I had to use two to three, included "sickle," which I found prosaic and ignored altogether. There was "absorb" and "glitter," which I feel are well-incorporated: it's a game about Wilde protagonists, who are self-absorbed and generally rich. It's also a game about keeping the audience absorbed, although that's a bit of a stretch. Oh, and it's about plays which are full of style but lacking in substance… glitter in dramaturgical form. I should think those count as thematic backbones.

The final ingredient was "wild," which I opted to misinterpret and misspell. It seemed to work fine.

If you haven't seen any of the comedies by Oscar Wilde, well, I encourage you to do so. Not because it's strictly necessary

for the game; it might help but I think farce is widespread enough of a genre that just about anyone should have a handle on it. Rather, Wilde writes excellent farces. 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is a classic and make no mistake about it; it is arguably the best comedy in the English language, and it's without argument within the top, say, fifty. There's a fairly good movie version with Colin Firth if you haven't seen it.

Make no mistake, while the cast of this game are dismissive of Mr. Wilde, and believe his plays to be flimsy, disposable things, they are, in this playwright's opinion, amazing works, far more plotted and intelligent than they may get credit for, in addition to being consistently hilarious. By all accounts, Oscar Wilde worked hard on these things.

[The **Playwright** sighs, and his mood appears to darken.]

Playwright: I feel bad for maligning the man’s character within this play. Not awful, no, and not bad enough to not do it, but still. He’s a bit of a tragic figure.

When his last plays were published, Wilde's reputation in England had been ruined, and he was living in self-imposed exile in Paris. His name did not appear on 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' only a note that it was by the author of 'Lady Windermere's Fan.' Hence, the title of this game.

[He clears his throat and brightens up a bit.]

Playwright: Obviously, this game is early in its development; a week doesn’t leave a lot of time for polish. But it is, I think, playable. If you want to play it, please do! I will be excited beyond reason.

If you have the time and interest, I would love to hear any comments, for good or ill. This is a game I pushed out in a week's time, so it will be hard to criticize me so hard that I break, I promise. I have a website at "synanthropes dot com," and can be reached by e-mail at "ededed at gmail dot com." I would love to hear anything you have to say.

[At this point, the **Playwright** begins jumping up and down, waving his arms, and running about, as if to draw everyone's attention to this page.

LOOK HERE! THIS IS THE IMPORTANT BIT! IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, START READING HERE!

…is what he seems to be saying, with his body language.]

Playwright: If you are going to try to play this game, let me make things a little easier on you.

Now, I know that an in-character rules document is fun and all, and certainly flavorful, but they're also a bit of a burden. Rules get buried in dialogue, or are placed in a way that makes sense for a conversation, but not necessarily for use while playing. Also, it gets to be a bit long. Never great.

To that end, I'd like to summarize the rules of the game as plainly as I can here; you can follow the full script for details about why things work the way they do, but if you just want the play by play summary, well, here you go.

The Game: "By the Author of Lady Windermere's Fan," a story game for 3-5 players.

The Plot: Due to an intense level of incompetence, your theater group realizes that opening night is tonight, and not only are they unprepared, they can't find the script. Luckily, they know it's an Oscar Wilde farce, so they're going to just make it up.

What you need: Three to five players to be the actors in this company, who will portray the major and minor characters.

A stack of index cards and writing utensils.

Tokens to represent the audience's favor; coins work well for this purpose.

Setting up: Here's what you do to get ready for the play, and the order in which to do it:

1. Each player writes one or two possible sets on index cards, one per card.
    - This is to be done without comparing with one another.
    - Traditional sets include parlor rooms and London flats, but anything is possible.
    - Once the sets have been created, use them to get a rough idea of the setting for the play: contemporary, Victorian, historical, sci-fi, etc.
    - Discard the sets which won't work for a given setting, and keep the rest in a pile nearby.
2. Each player creates a character who will fit with those sets, writing their details on another index card.
    - Most characters should be idle members of the upper class, whatever that means in this particular genre.
    - Give characters a name and a brief description.
3. Players flesh out their characters with narratively-interesting attributes: a Tragic Secret, a Vice (or Virtue), and a pair of Relationships.
    - The Tragic Secret can be anything your character doesn't want the world to know. All secrets, no matter how trivial-seeming, are equally tragic.

- The Vice (or Virtue) is something that makes your character interesting.
- Establish a Relationship with the character to your left. The character to your right will establish a Relationship with you.
- Write all of that down on your index card.

4. Each player creates one ancillary character and two props. Write each down on a separate index card.
    - The character is someone who is important to your character; any player might play that character during the show. Rivals, true loves, and butlers are common.
    - The props can be anything you might want to use in the play. It's useful to make one which might tie to your secret and one which might represent your virtue (or vice).
    - When finished, keep the characters and props within easy reach of everyone.
5. Finally, each player creates a card for their lie and their happy ending.
    - Write your character's name and the words "happy ending" on the top of one card. If you know what their happy ending will be, write it underneath.
    - If a character is unmarried, but has a true love, their happy ending should involve getting married.
    - Write your character's name and the word "lie" on top of the other card, leave plenty of room, and draw three empty circles on the bottom.
    - If you have thought of a lie which your character is telling the world, write it down. Otherwise, leave it blank for now.

Playing the Game:

Structure:

- Play is broken into Acts and Scenes. There are three Acts, each of which contains one scene per player; the third act contains one final wrap-up scene.

    - Before an Act, all players collectively decide what set it is going to take place at.
    - Every scene in an Act takes place on the same set.
    - Every character selects one prop which they can hide somewhere on stage, for later retrieval.
- The player whose character is lowest in status (as determined by the players) sets up the first scene.
    - Thereafter, set up scenes in clockwise order.
    - Each player will set up one scene per Act.
- The player setting up a scene decides which characters are present, what the general thrust of the scene is, and which lie is going to be confronted during this scene.
    - The player whose lie is being confronted must be present.
    - The player setting the scene may have their own lie confronted, or another players.
    - Place the confronted lie's card in an easy-to-see spot, so everyone knows what to focus on.
    - Minor characters can be played by any available player: take that character's card to indicate who you are playing at the moment.
- Players who are present in the scene narrate their actions as necessary and banter with one another.
    - Go on and off stage as necessary.
    - If your genre allows for impossible actions like turning into a bat, those must happen offstage. You are actors, not wizards.
- Once a lie has been confronted and embellished, the player who set it up should bring it to an end rapidly, and the next player sets up their scene.
    - Scenes occur very close to one another in time; ideally they will flow into one another. They may be separated by a few minutes, but by no more than an hour.
    - You may not confront the same player's lie two turns in a row.
- The final scene of an Act must conclude with a bon mot.

    - After the Act-ending bon-mot has been delivered, the actors must shout “Curtain!” to indicate that the curtain is being lowered.
- After the last player-created scene in Act III, there is one final scene.
    - The final scene includes every character who has not get gotten their happy ending.
    - Instead of confronting a lie, every character acquires their happy ending.
    - This scene must still end with a bon mot and a shout of “Curtain!”

Confronting and Embellishing Lies:

- Every scene is built around a single lie being confronted.
    - The lie should in most cases exist in the narrative before the scene begins.
    - If you create your character’s lie during a scene, that does NOT count as embellishing it.
- A lie is confronted when a character comes to doubt it.
    - Characters should not question one another without reason.
    - Conveniently discovered props can be used to confront lies.
- When your lie is confronted, you must embellish it.
    - Replace the lie with a bigger, grander, harder to maintain lie.
    - Fill in one of the circles on your lie card, to indicate that it has been embellished.
- When a lie has been embellished three times you may, in any scene after the one in which you embellished it, reveal the lie.
    - You, or any character under your control, reveal that your lie is in fact untrue.
    - Cross out the lie card, but do not yet discard it.
    - You may do this at any point in a scene, before or after that scene’s lie is confronted.
- At any point in any scene, you may discard your revealed lie, and in so doing, create an improbable coincidence.

    - An improbable coincidence is any unlikely event or remembered fact which causes your character to achieve their happy ending.

Pace, Bon Mots, and Audience Tokens:

- Each player begins with three audience tokens.
    - These tokens represent the goodwill the audience feels toward a particular actor (and, in total, the play as a whole).
- The audience expects rapid-paced dialogue.
    - There should never be more than ten seconds of silence or contemplation.
    - If the actors on stage are silent for too long, those offstage are expected to jump onstage, just to keep things moving.
- Players may take a minute or two to think and discuss between scenes.
- Players may take as much time as they like to think and discuss between Acts.
    - Before Act II every player must decide on their lie.
    - Before Act III every player must decide on their happy ending.
- The audience loves bon mots and other Wilde witticisms.
    - A bon mot is any amusing line which an actor utters onstage.
    - A line which elicits laughter from the other players is a completely successful bon mot.
        - If you make the other players laugh, honestly, then take an audience token from the supply.
        - If you make the other players laugh so hard that it interrupts the game, then take two audience tokens from the supply.
        - If someone deserves a token but neglects to take it, pass a token to them. hilarity should be rewarded.
    - A line which is obviously intended to elicit laughter but fails, or which produces only groans of annoyance, is an unsuccessful bon mot.
        - There is no reward of audience tokens for this.

        - You may, however, end an act on a groaner. The effort to bon mot is enough.
- Tokens in your possession may be spent when you do things which might lessen the audience's good will.
    - Spend tokens to take time to think.
        - At any time, a player may spend a token; they may then think for up to a minute before they speak. The other players shall allow them this time without interruption.
    - Spend tokens to talk out of character.
        - If you need to whisper to another player, either to ask them to change what they said, or to confirm what they're doing in the scene, or to ask them to go be a different character, spend a token.
    - Spend tokens to get things from stagehands.
        - If you need a special effect to occur (like a blackout or an offscreen noise), or a non-speaking character to appear, or a prop which you didn't prepare earlier, spend a token.
        - Spend a token every time a stagehand-character appears on stage or a stagehand-created prop is used.

Wrapping up

- If players cannot finish a scene, or if they run out of audience tokens but cannot keep up the pace, or if any other factor prevents them from getting every character to a happy ending, then the show has flopped.
    - The audience will want their money back. You will probably be fired.
- Otherwise, if every player got to a happy ending, the show was a success!
    - But we should figure out who was the most successful.
    - Whichever player has the most audience tokens was the most popular character.

        - If multiple players are tied, the players with fewer tokens decide which one was most popular.
        - If ALL players are tied, whomever set the first scene was most popular.
- Take your bows.
    - Everyone except the most popular player bows at once.
    - The most popular player gets the last bow.
    - Afterwards, the most popular player may announce the title of the play, so that the audience can tell their friends to come see it.
- Take one last bow, everybody. Congratulations, you made it through opening night.
    - Just eight more shows a week for four weeks to go!

[The **Playwright** clears his throat.]

Playwright: I don't know about you, but I am impressed with my ability to pronounce all of those bullet points. Still, that's much quicker and more sensible than the in-character rules, so it's good to have around.

Thank you for your time. And hey, if you enjoyed playing this game half as much as I enjoyed writing it, then I've had twice as much fun as you.

[Exits.]

Playwright: [Shouting, from offstage.] CURTAIN!

END